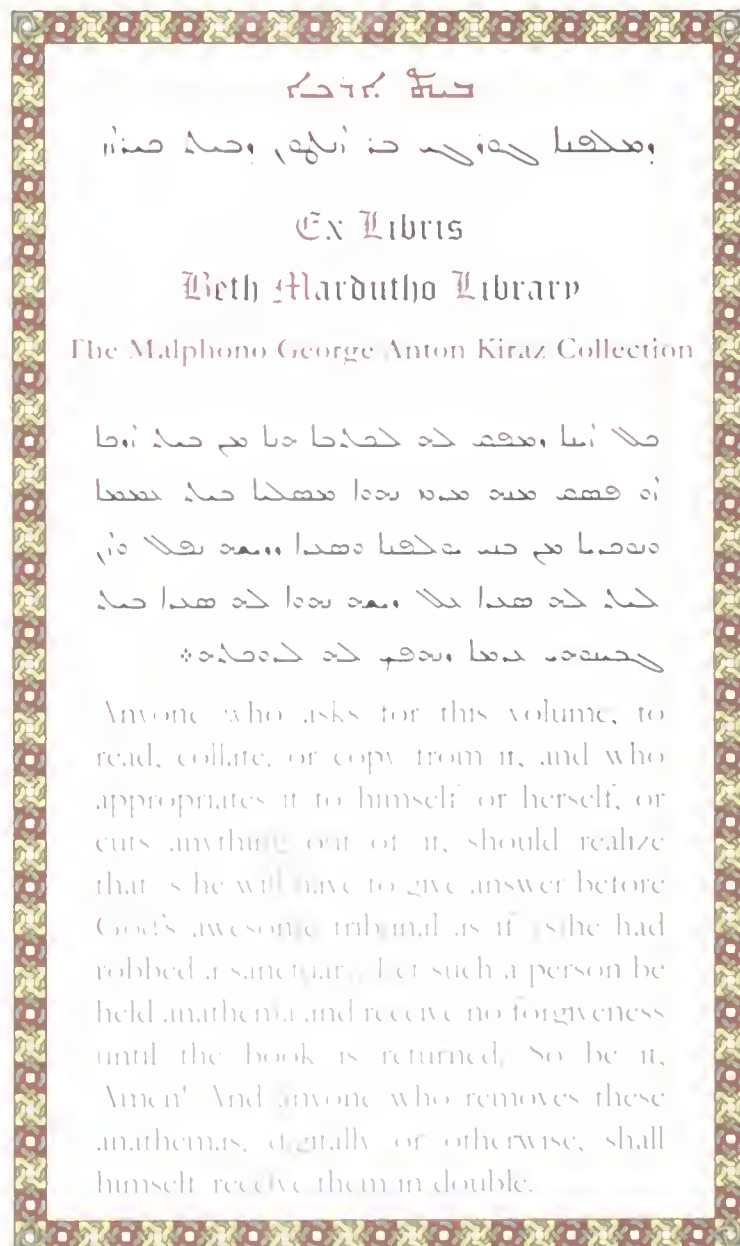


# **Notes on The Marriage and Celibacy of Priests**

*Tiran Nersoyan, Abp.*



NOTES ON THE  
MARRIAGE AND CELIBACY  
OF PRIESTS

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It would perhaps be useful for a better understanding of the subject of this article to clear up a number of popular misconceptions about certain words which are used to designate the various orders and ranks of Armenian clergy. I hope the reader will excuse this parenthetical section at the beginning of what I propose to say.

### *Who is a Deacon?*

Usually we call a “deacon” anybody among the clerical personnel in the church who serves at the altar, assisting the celebrant during the Divine Liturgy, or in the chancel during any of the offices, reciting litanies and taking his part in the ceremonies as indicated in the rubrics of service books. Yet many persons thus serving are not, properly speaking, deacons, because they have not been regularly ordained into the diaconate. Sometimes, in order to obviate confusion, an ordained deacon is called “archdeacon,” differentiating him from non-ordained “deacons.” But the term “archdeacon” does not denote a separate order. It can be only applied to an ordained deacon who is senior among a group of others attached to a church. “Arch-” of course simply means “senior” (awag), just as the senior among a group of priests attached to a church is called “archpriest,” which is the equivalent of “dean” in western usage. The difference between deacon and archdeacon is quite clearly shown in the Armenian Church Ordinal (Book of Ordinations).

### *Who is a Priest?*

In popular usage priests are of three categories: “abela” (=monk), “qahanay” (=priest) and “vardapet” (=doctor). The first is a term which, canonically and properly speaking, is applied to any person, be he a layman or a deacon or a priest, who has taken the monastic vows and is a member of a religious brotherhood and customarily lives in a monastery. Yet in popular speech the term “abela” is applied to a celibate priest who does not have the ecclesiastical-academic degree of doctor. Thus a priest who is neither a “qahanay” or a “vardapet” is called an “abela.”

Then we have the word “qahanay” which means simply priest. In public usage, however, it is applied only to married priests. Yet, properly speaking, it has no reference whatever to the marital status or any other qualification of a priest. A

celibate priest, be he an “abela” or “vardapet,” is as much of a “qahanay” as a married one.

### *Who is a Vardapet?*

“Vardapet” is another term which is misused in popular speech by being applied only to celibate priests who have the degree of ecclesiastical-academic degree of doctorate. Yet the word makes no reference to the clerical order of the clergyman who has the degree. In fact, the Ordinal (=the Book of Ordinations) meticulously avoids the use of the word “priest” in referring to the person who is presented for the degree of vardapet. Such a person is invariably called in the Ordinal “the invitee” (hrawirealn). Bishops, patriarchs and catholici have often been called “vardapet” down to the not too distant past. Sometimes they are called “great vardapet.” Theoretically there is no reason why a married priest, a deacon or even a layman should not be invested with the degree of “vardapet.” The term refers to the intellectual and spiritual qualification of a person who has formally and ceremonially received the permission to teach the Faith.

### *Other Offices and Ranks*

All these misnomers have their explanation and history. But I need not expatiate thereon. Properly and canonically speaking there are three and only three orders in the Church: deacon (sarkawag), priest (qahanay) and bishop (episkopos). All other designations used for the various offices and ranks of ordained clergymen refer either to an honorary or administrative or ecclesiastical-academic qualification or function. Such are the terms “awagsarkawag” (archdeacon), “awag qahanay” or “awageretz” (archpriest), “abela” (monk), “vardapet” (doctor), “dsayragoyn vardapet” (plenary or full doctor), “arqepiskopos” (archbishop), “patriarq” (patriarch). The ordination of the catholikos is a case apart. It came into use in order to reinforce ritually the authority of the administrative head of the Church over the bishops of the Church. Only the higher orders are received by ordination. All other offices or ranks are conferred either by ritual blessing or by written instrument.

### *The Rule of Celibacy*

Celibacy is not obligatory for a priest of the Armenian Church. A candidate for the priesthood may choose either



the celibate or the married state. Unlike the Roman Church but like other Orthodox Churches the Armenian Church does not make celibacy a condition for priesthood.

By and large the principle of the celibacy rule can be stated simply: marriage may not follow ordination. But certain provisions, which we shall discuss further down, somewhat complicate this simple formula. Taking those canonical provisions into account, the rule can be set down in more detail thus: In the case of a deacon, marriage may not follow ordination, unless the candidate has declared to the bishop that he intends to marry after ordination. In the case of a priest, marriage may not follow ordination, unless the priest becomes a widower. In the case of a bishop, marriage may neither precede nor follow ordination. To these it must be added that in all cases a widower has the same status as a celibate.

This rule of celibacy has been in force in all ancient churches in all countries including Armenia, from the time of the apostles. The great church historian Hefele says that there is absolutely no instance in which marriage was contracted by the clergy after ordination during the first three centuries and down through the middle ages. The same applies, we might add, to the Armenian Church from the beginning with St. Gregory the Enlightener to the year 1922, notwithstanding erroneous popular notices to the contrary entertained by some journalists of recent times.

#### *In the Case of a Deacon*

It is readily seen that the rule of celibacy is canonically operative beginning with the ordination to the diaconate. In other words, a deacon also should make his choice between married or celibate state before his ordination. This provision stands even in view of the Canon No. XI of the Council of Ancyra, which provides: "When deacons are led to be ordained and they declare saying: 'we are not able to be celibate', they shall be allowed to be ordained and remain so until such time as they are properly married, because conjugal beds are undefiled and marriage is honorable." (*Kanonagirq Hayots*, Ed. Vazgen Hakobyan, Erevan, 1964, p.161. Note: All subsequent references to canons in this article are from this book.)

In reality, therefore, although in the case of a deacon marriage can be contracted after ordination, yet the candi-

date has to make his definitive choice before ordination. And while after ordination a shift to celibacy would presumably be allowed, a shift in the other direction would not. In other words, if a deacon married after promising celibacy, he would be defrocked. The second part of the Canon, cited above, continues: "And subsequently they shall approach priesthood and shall remain in service, because of having been allowed by the bishop. But if some were silent when being consecrated (=ordained), and obligingly agreed (to celibacy) as if they would remain steadfast in that station, and then later married, they shall be barred from priesthood and shall be excluded from the order of deacons. (They shall make penance), and when the bishop has examined him and has considered his repentance, he shall receive communion, but he shall not be allowed to return to the order and the station." (This Canon has a shorter form in the original Greek, but the sense of the original has been kept intact in the Armenian.)

It is instructive to note in this Canon that it is up to the Bishop to allow or not to allow the marriage of a clergyman of high order, namely a deacon. This Canon, like many others, shows that actually a candidate for priesthood will have already chosen his state, married or celibate, before his ordination while he is a layman. This being so, it would then make no difference how long a time would elapse between ordination to the diaconate and ordination to priesthood. A person can remain a deacon all his life and if he has promised celibacy he may never marry. It follows from this that a priest will have no new choice between marriage and celibacy before his ordination. He will have made that choice before being a deacon. The same, *a fortiori*, applies to a bishop, in as much as he also will have made his choice before receiving the first order, which is the diaconate.

### *Monastic Celibacy*

Having stated and clarified the import of the rule of celibacy, we must now consider certain aspects of its operation which have to be taken into account before trying to apply it, i.e., the rule, to concrete cases and situations in our times.

There is no direct reference in the prayers of ordination to the prospect of the celibacy of the ordinand, i.e. candidate to ordination. Nor does an ordinand have to make a formal

vow, written or declaratory, to remain celibate for life, before his ordination by the bishop. The canon says that if a candidate "remains silent" before being ordained a deacon he may not marry afterwards. This shows that the rule is actually one of prohibition of marriage for clergymen rather than an explicit vow. In monasteries, however, a formal vow is required of the candidate immediately before his ordination to the diaconate, and this vow is linked to the induction of the ordinand into the monastic order. Now when a monk (a deacon or a priest) leaves the monastic order either on his own initiative or on the initiative of his superior, but without being defrocked, then although the prohibition for him not to marry will stand, yet he will have to be released from his vows. And this release could only be pronounced by the bishop into whose jurisdiction the monk, now a secular priest, will have entered. This is so, because no higher authority is needed to release a person from his vows than the one who has administered those vows to him in the first place, namely, the abbot of the monastery. We can even go a step further and say that the very act of separation of the monk from the monastic order constitutes for him a release from his vows. (I have made this point here to show why, among other reasons which we shall give later, an Arachnord has the jurisdiction to release a former monk from his monastic vows.)

### *The Rule for Sub-Deacons*

In the Armenian Ordinal there is a rubric in the foreword to the rite of blessing of sub-deacon which prohibits the marriage of this officer of lower order. For long centuries now the office of sub-deacon has ceased to be of any significance even from a ritual point of view. Consequently the ceremony of making a sub-deacon has always been joined to that of the ordination of deacon. This requirement of celibacy for the sub-deacon in the Armenian Ordinal is most probably the result of Latin influence. The marriage of sub-deacons was prohibited in the West by the Eighth Council of Toledo (Canon VI) in A.D. 653. I could find no such prohibition directly mentioned in the Armenian Book of Canons (=Church Laws), unless Apostolic XXIV is construed as covering sub-deacons also. I mention this instance in order to show that rubrics, which form part of the so-called "tradition," cannot always be considered of



value, unless they are based on solid, operative church legislation.

### *The Rule in the Canons*

The Canon that has been cited above is not the only one on celibacy. Certain other Canons or church laws also speak on the subject. I shall here cite some of them with pertinent comments where necessary.

“Those who have reached the age of maturity and have promised to observe celibacy and then afterwards have broken their promise will have fallen into adultery. He can no more be a celibate (i.e. *koys*), but should be considered like a person twice married and should be dealt with accordingly; they should receive the same penance (as prescribed), the warmth of their repentance should be seen, and then they should be allowed to partake of the communion. But they should not be presented for ordination to priesthood. Also, concerning those virgins who had been attaching themselves to some (clergy) as sisters, we have prohibited them, so that such things shall not be.” (Ancyra, No. XX).

This is one of the oldest and more important church statutes on the subject of celibacy. It has been in force in all ancient churches and dates from 314 A.D. The canon refers to the promise made by a lay person, eventually to be a candidate for priesthood. Special notice should be taken of the provision that the promise of celibacy should be made by a person who has reached “the age of maturity.” The implication of course is that the promise, if made by an immature person, would be void. The Canon does not decide on a precise age. It is naturally left to the discretion of the officer in the church who will receive the promise. Other canons show that the officer is the bishop, who would naturally be also the person to judge the promise to be void if taken by a person who is not of mature age. In monasteries that person would be the abbot, the head of a monastic brotherhood. It should be noted that the canon is a legislation on an already existing usage, referring at the same time to an existing abuse of the rule, not unknown also in our own times in one form or another . . .

One of the Canons of Saint Gregory the Enlightener (No.II) states: “If a priest takes a wife, he should do penance by standing outside the church (during the services) for five

years and then inside for two years and then he should receive communion.”

This canon applies equally to celibate and widowed priests. This is an important point in view of the dispensation which Catholicos Georg V allowed in 1922, to which we shall refer later in this article. We should also take special note of the fact that the canon does not prescribe defrocking of the priest, be he celibate or widowed. Canon No.XXX of the same legislation, however, tells the bishop what to do in that respect. It states: “A virgin or a monk who has dedicated himself to God shall not get married. But if he is found to have married, he shall stay away from communion, and the bishop, observing his conduct shall, at his discretion, treat him with humane charity (mardasiruthiwn).” A shorter canon (No.XIII) in the same constitution is to the same effect.

Now, it should be stressed very strongly that while a Church Council or a Church Father legislates for the whole Church, yet the jurisdiction to make special dispensations for departure from the general rule belongs exclusively to the bishop in ordinary (arachnord) and to no one else. I shall dwell on this important ecclesiological principle further down.

There are other canons in the Armenian Book of Canons which address themselves to the same problem to the same effect as the ones already cited. Such are, for example, St. Basil X and XXIX, St. Athanasius DXV and DXVI. The latter forbids the ordination into priesthood of a layman who has made a promise of celibacy and then has subsequently married a virgin or a widow. The reason given for this prohibition is: “Because he would be considered as having married a second time.”

Almost all the basic canons on the rule of celibacy belong to the early period of the established church, i.e., the fourth and the fifth centuries, and no new legislation has since been needed as the rule has continued to be steadfastly maintained up to the present.

### *As the Rule Stands Now*

We have already noted that the rule is of one piece and applies equally and uniformly to all three of the higher or major orders in the Church: deacons, priests and bishops. It also applies to laymen who are monks. It follows from this

that when a priest breaks his promise of celibacy, whether vowed explicitly or undertaken implicitly, he does not break a promise specifically made before priesthood, but made earlier before his ordination to the diaconate. Yet in the Armenian Church it is now a fact that the rule of celibacy of deacons has already fallen into disuse and can therefore be considered obsolete, except in monasteries, where it is incorporated into the special monastic vows. It is generally known that for sometime now, at least since the second World War, deacons have been allowed to marry after ordination and then retain their order and exercise their office. Nor has any distinction been made in this respect between monastic deacons, i.e., monk-deacons and secular deacons.

During the last several decades many of the former, i.e. monk-deacons, have left their monasteries, for one reason or another, and have married and have been subsequently ordained into the priesthood by diocesan bishops in clear contravention of the old rule. Nor has any mention been made of celibacy in the case of secular deacons before their ordination by the bishops. Of important pertinence also is the fact that many celibate priests, who have left their order while in celibacy, have later married, and have subsequently been allowed by bishops to function as regular deacons in office, again in clear contravention of the old rule. But it is of crucial significance specially to note that the case of celibate deacons who have married and then have been ordained priests is in no way different from the case of celibate priests who have married and thereafter have been allowed to retain their order and their office. We could mention by name at least a dozen clergymen falling into one or other of the categories noted above. This means that the rule has already been set aside in a considerable number of instances in the course of about thirty years without any reaction being stirred up by certain elements in the Church. The instances we refer to are celibate deacons, ordained in Jerusalem, who broke their explicit vows, married and went to Armenia, where they were ordained priests and are now working as priests fulfilling a useful function. There are many other such clergymen who are doing commendable work here in the United States and in South America. We also know of at least one case of a celibate priest from Jerusalem who got married, went to Armenia and was allowed to continue his



priestly function. We even know of the case of more than one bishop whose former wife was alive, though separated, when he was consecrated a bishop in Etchmiadzin.

### *Jurisdiction of Diocesan Bishops*

It is perfectly in order to ask at this point the question: How did all this come about? There certainly was no ecclesiastical legislation by any Church Council covering these cases. Nor was there any general pronouncement by any Catholikos-Patriarch. The answer is that the change has taken place by the action of individual diocesan bishops, under the pressure of the exigencies of the times and for the good of the Church under given circumstances. We have already seen in the canons and we see in practice that the married state is not incompatible with the state of priesthood or diaconate. This has been the governing principle in the ancient Church in allowing a married person to become a deacon and then a priest.

Then the problem arises: Do bishops of dioceses have the jurisdiction or the authority to set aside the rule in particular instances and permit a deacon or a priest belonging to his diocesan clergy to marry? The canons already cited (Ancyra XI, St. Gregory XXX) make the issue clear. They show that the jurisdiction to release a deacon or a priest from his promise of celibacy belongs to the bishop of the diocese. There are weightier matters of discipline which fall under the jurisdiction of the diocesan bishop. All acts of defrocking of deacons and priests decidedly fall within his jurisdiction, in as much as he who has the authority to ordain has the authority to defrock. To give another example: Nicaea XIX decides that when a clergyman of an heretical sect comes into the Orthodox Church, the bishop, at his discretion, determines whether the convert should be reordained or he should continue to function as priest in the Orthodox Church. With stronger reason, therefore, a bishop can release a clergyman from the obligation of celibacy as a special dispensation. And there is no canon, nor a valid precedent, ascribing this authority to any other officer of the Church. Even the Catholikos-Patriarch may not make judgments in such cases in the first instance. He may only act on appeal against an injustice or delinquency on the part of a bishop by bringing the case before the Council of Bishops of the Church. Those who are of contrary opinion should cite



pertinent legislation, and not take refuge in the dense fog of what they fancy as being “the tradition.”

### *The Principle of Economy*

It is highly important to distinguish, however, between the enactment of a general rule for the entire Church, on the one hand, and the granting of a special dispensation in an individual case by exempting a person or a group of persons from an obligation under a general rule, on the other. Such special dispensations are based on what is called, in ecclesiastical terminology, the principle of economy. Simply stated, it means the refraction of a rule still on the books for the greater good of the Church in a given situation. This permission is given by the bishop at his discretion after due consultation and deliberation. Thus, while Church Councils and Church Fathers have enacted the rule prohibiting marriage after ordination, yet the Church allows bishops to permit exceptions in special cases.

We must bear in mind that by and large it is this principle of economy that paves the way for the evolution of the disciplinary setup of the Church under the impact of changes in the human environment to which the Church has to react continuously. This is the way by which rules and structural forms gradually become obsolete and inapplicable and give way to new legislation and new procedures. This is the way by which competent authorities become aware and pressed for changes and move to act giving expression to new needs by new determinations and legislation. It is the way of trial and error, in which the final arbiter is the mind of the Church as informed by the living Christ and the Holy Spirit. Changes in the structure of a given society are not originally initiated by legislatures, occupying seats of power at the top. That is not the way the evolutionary process in human institutions takes place. Changes come about as a result of pressures from below, from the grass roots, from people who experience day in and day out the inadequacies of the prevailing laws and customs with which they live. This is the bedrock of the principle of democracy. If the authorities on the vertical line, beginning from the lower level and going up higher, are sensitive to these pressures, then you have evolution. If on the other hand they are insensitive, you will have a revolution on your hands. The principle of economy in the Church has the function of keeping the regulatory

structure of the Church flexible. When instances of special dispensations gradually multiply at the initiative of different competent officers in different places, then the rule affected is brought into question under pressure and eventually a new regulation by higher authorities follows. If, on the other hand, instances remain isolated and do not evoke a favorable response, then the old rule stands and instances disappear in the course of time.

For many decades now people have been clamoring and writing about "the problem of celibacy." Eventually the issue had to be brought to test, so that change, if really felt to be overdue, could take its course.

### *The Prerogative of Making Dispensations*

We have already mentioned numerous precedents wherein refractions of the rule of celibacy have been allowed in Armenia and elsewhere. In the case of clergymen who were married and continued in office in Armenia, the permission for them to do so was granted by the Catholikos-Patriarch. This would give to some the impression that the granting of the special dispensations in the cases mentioned were the prerogative of the Catholikos of All Armenians. This is not so, as we tried to show in discussing the canons we have cited above. It must be pointed out that the Catholikos did not grant these dispensations in his capacity as the Catholikos of All Armenians, but in his capacity as the Bishop of the Diocese of Erevan, in as much as the Catholikos in Etchmiadzin has three distinct capacities or offices. The Catholikos is, firstly, the Bishop of the Diocese of Erevan. This is shown by the fact that the Diocese of Erevan is called "Patriarchal Diocese" and is governed always by the Catholikos himself through a Vicar General residing in Erevan. This, incidentally, conforms to the practice of almost all heads of Churches in different countries (the Pope of Rome, the Oecumenical Patriarch of Constantinople, the Coptic Patriarch of Alexandria, the Armenian Patriarch of Constantinople, etc.). Secondly, the Catholikos is the Patriarch of the Armenian Church within the boundaries of the Soviet Union, comprising five dioceses. The Catholikos supervises these five dioceses, which are called "inner dioceses," much more closely than the so called "outer dioceses," such as Egypt, United States, France, etc. His jurisdiction on the dioceses of the Diaspora is much less extensive than on the "inner

dioceses.” Before the first World War the Armenian Patriarch of Constantinople also had two different capacities, in that he was the Bishop of Istanbul and the Patriarch of the Church in the Ottoman Empire at the same time. And then thirdly, of course, the incumbent of Etchmiadzin is the Patriarch-Catholikos of All Armenians throughout the world. Yet there seems to be much confusion in the minds of some about the nature and the extent of the jurisdiction of the Catholikos over the bishops of the Church and the churches in general. But the only way of clarifying this matter adequately is to go to the Canons and the Constitutions.

### *An Important Departure from the Rule*

In 1922 Catholikos Georg V took a significant step which had a very important bearing on the rule of celibacy. From the ancient centuries down to that date the Church had not yet allowed widowed priests to remarry, consistently with the rule of the prohibition of marriage after ordination. On that date, however, the Catholikos, after consultation with his bishops in Etchmiadzin, issued an encyclical addressed generally to the whole Armenian Church, in which he allowed bishops to permit the remarriage of widowed priests. By doing this he broke the long-standing rule that no clergyman may marry while in his orders.

It must be pointed out that this amendment of the rules at the time was not made in a proper and regular manner. No canons pertaining to the matter in hand were mentioned or set aside. Nor was the question brought before the Council of Bishops of the Church for formal action, in as much as the decree of the Catholikos was an act of important disciplinary legislation for the whole Church and not just a special dispensation in a special case. But these irregularities were unavoidable. Travel to and from Etchmiadzin was at the time impossible, particularly for bishops. Turmoil in the world, and specially in Armenia, had not yet subsided in the aftermath of the first World War. The services of widowed priests were sorely needed in the Church at the time, and for them to remain single was considered to be an undue hardship. So the Catholikos, after consulting with as many bishops as he could, issued the decree in accordance with the principle of economy. And now the amendment of the rule has stood the test of time for almost half a century and should therefore be considered as being established. We



should, however, add that, Sahak of Antelias (1902-+1939) and the bishops of his constituency have to this day refused to accept the ruling of Georg V. Also the Patriarchate of Jerusalem had at the time its reservations on the matter. It is a debatable point whether these facts would in any way make the ruling canonically provisional.

### *The Consequence of the Amendment of the Rule*

The decree allowing the remarriage of widowed priests has a very important implication for the rule of celibacy. We have already seen that this rule had two distinct elements in it: a) a clergyman may not marry so long as he remains a clergyman after his ordination to the diaconate (even if he was married before his ordination and became a widower later); b) a clergyman may not break his promise or vow of celibacy made while he was a layman before his ordination to the diaconate. Accordingly, if a married clergyman becomes a widower and marries again, he breaks only the first part of the rule as defined in the canons. But if marriage is contracted by a celibate priest, he breaks both parts of the rule at the same time. Now, however, after the decree of 1922, when a celibate priest marries, he breaks only the second part of the rule. In other words, the breaking of the promise of celibacy on his part will have nothing to do, will have no relation to the fact of his being an ordained clergyman. Because, as we have seen, the rule of celibacy applies equally to lay people, who can and in fact do make vows and come under the same rule of celibacy as clearly defined by the canons. It follows from this that when a celibate priest wishes to marry, all he needs is a special individual dispensation to release him from his promise of celibacy, a release which he would have needed even if he were not a priest, but only a layman. It is readily seen, therefore, that the general permission for widowed priests to remarry has altered the nature of the rule of celibacy of priests and has opened the way for their remaining in office after marriage upon release by the bishop from their promise of celibacy.

### *Why Celibacy?*

It will perhaps be instructive to remember that preference of celibacy over marriage has its origin, so far as Christian



religion is concerned, in the New Testament. The reason for this preference is the freedom celibacy gives to the person from family cares and makes him, or her, able to render total service to Christ and his Church. Once stated, this idea would naturally make celibacy a more excellent state, in as much as it would enable a person to serve a sacred purpose more fully. It was against the abuse and the exaggeration of this idea that Canon X of Gangra in the Armenian Book of Canons, echoing the words of St. Ignatius, declares: "Those who are virgins for the sake of God and then take the position that they are superior to married persons and thus become arrogant, let them be anathema."

The requirement that a celibate clergyman when married should no more be permitted to continue exercising his vocation and should be defrocked could only be advocated on three possible underlying assumptions: 1) The clergyman who breaks or is released from his vow commits a sin so grievous that he should be punished therefor by being deprived of his office. This is a legalistic punitive approach. 2) By abandoning his vow and marrying, a celibate priest defiles his sacred vocation and should therefore be disqualified for his office as having become morally unfit to exercise his holy functions. This attitude reminds one of the old manichaeian morality. 3) Marriage will place on the shoulders of the clergyman such a heavy burden of family cares and social and economic responsibilities that his love for his flock will be dissipated and he will not be able to devote all his energies of body and soul to his sacred calling and it will make him at best a half-time worker. Therefore he should leave his work entirely and the Church should find others who would approximate the ideal more closely. This view could be described as spiritual utilitarianism.

### *Relativity of a Vow*

As to the first point, a vow is taken or a promise is made under a given set of circumstances with the reasonable anticipation and assumption of certain durable conditions and for certain purposes. But when those conditions have changed and the purposes can no more be served in a reasonable measure, due largely to external factors, then the continued observance of the vow becomes senseless and sometimes even sinful obstinacy. An immature young man in

his late teens planning to live in the atmosphere of a somewhat secluded monastery in the constant company of his peers, where all his material needs will be provided for during the rest of his life, may very well be expected and required to observe his vow of celibacy and lead a life of study, prayers and related endeavors. But bring this celibate young man and place him in the environment of a modern western city and put him in an apartment to live all by himself, and then give him the responsibilities of running a busy parish and struggling with its problems, and you will see a young man looking entirely out of place in his vow. After all, we have to remember that taking a vow of celibacy for life cannot be compared with the choosing of a career. A career dedicated to the work of God is not necessarily related to a life of celibacy. The embracing of the latter is of an entirely different nature and on a totally different level. It goes without saying that the Church has insisted on the observance of the rule of celibacy until our times because the social conditions and the general world outlook with which a clergyman had to cope were different.

### *Celibacy Advisable*

The second assumption is patently heretical. The New Testament and the Church Fathers make abundantly clear that while the state of celibacy is advisable for certain types among the clergy in certain circumstances, yet the married state is in no way impure or inferior or discreditable.

The third view has of course great merit, as many a married clergyman will readily admit. This view has been insistently advocated by Saint Paul and after him by the Fathers of the Church down the centuries. Yet its validity depends on so many circumstances that it could not be taken as a basis for a general prohibition of marriage for all ordained clergymen. Although this prohibition eventually became the rule in the Roman Church, beginning with the Council of Elvira and finalized by Pope Hildebrand (+1085), yet it was never adopted in the Eastern Church. Hence the provision in church canons for deacons and priests to keep their wives after ordination. The assessment of the circumstances, subjective as well as objective, which would suggest the advisability of marriage for deacons and priests, is therefore better left to the judgment of each clergyman himself. And

lest he be carried by self-seeking propensities and bad judgment in his choice of the one or other state, his bishop should have the appellate jurisdiction, as it were, to decide “with humane charity”, in the words of the canon. Celibacy for deacons is now in the process of being forgotten. There remains the accommodation with the marriage of priests by making their vow or promise contingent to their vocation and office.

### *Celibates in Secular Society*

There are and there have always been in society individuals who would and actually do remain celibate, being as it were made by nature for such a life. There are not a few men and women in secular walks of life who lead a normal, healthy, wholesome and useful life but who nevertheless prefer to remain single for diverse reasons. Some like to be alone and peaceful, away from the hustle and bustle of married life. Others are so engrossed with their specialized work or profession that they gladly forego the advantages of married life. The careers chosen by others are such that they stand in the way of a happy and normal family life. There are yet other reasons for which men and women choose to remain single or celibate.

### *Scarcity of Vocations*

We can of course argue plausibly that celibate priests should be drawn from among men of such or similar dispositions and thus the rule of prohibition after ordination should be maintained. Before the onset of the modern era probably a considerable number of celibate priests were in fact enlisted from among the kind of people who would be remaining celibate for reasons we have briefly indicated. Unfortunately, however, at present there are not enough men of such dispositions who would choose the priestly vocation. The causes of this scarcity are all around us to see. And, we can rest assured, economic considerations are not among the causes that keep people away from the sacred ministry. People do not respond to God’s calling or to the need of the Church with the expectation of a comfortable living with a fat salary. We cannot buy dedication with money, nor can we inflame a man’s soul with cold cash. There can be no two opinions about this. Let me only quote the Lord Jesus: “For



there are eunuchs [read: celibates] who were so born from their mother's womb, and there are eunuchs who were made eunuchs by men, and there are eunuchs who made themselves eunuchs for the sake of the kingdom of heaven. He that is able to receive it, let him receive it."

We should also bring to mind the fact that the majority of married priests, especially in our present day parishes which are by and large oriented towards social activism in their communal life, receive invaluable help in their ministry from their dedicated wives. A good "eretskin" with a sense of responsibility and adequate competence is an invaluable aid to her husband in the social life of the parish, in the office and in many other ways. This does not of course mean that "eretskins" are indispensable to the priest in his ministry. Not a few celibate priests accomplish even more in their work because of their being single. Yet once a priest decides to get married for other reasons, then the help of a prospective good "eretskin" would be an added relief for him.

### *Encouragement of Priests to Celibacy*

By allowing a priest to marry, when he wishes and his circumstances make it advisable for him, it must be pointed out, celibate priesthood would not be thereby abolished or become obsolete. The Church needs as many celibate priests as can be found. There are in the Church many ministries which require the services of dedicated priests who would choose to remain celibate, without, however, being subjected to the rule of celibacy as a condition for the continuation of their sacred office. The Church should assiduously encourage such men and create for them the environment in which they could work and be spiritually productive without being subjected to undue hardships. Missionaries, preachers, teachers, writers, researchers, administrators would often do a more fruitful work in the Church if they had the temperament and the serious dedication to enable them to remain celibate.

### *The Case of Bishops*

Bishops will still have to be chosen from among such men in the foreseeable future, at least so long as their status as theologically and canonically defined, their position under



the prevailing diocesan constitutions and the conditions in which they exercise their office remain unaltered. Because while the Church has considered married life perfectly compatible with the ministry of deacons and priests, she has resolutely maintained the rule of celibacy without any loopholes for bishops from the earliest centuries down to our own times. There is no evidence that bishops in Armenia in the fourth and fifth centuries who were married laymen or priests before their consecration as bishops, had their wives with them or alive after their consecration. The rules and the prevailing custom would never have allowed them to be living as married bishops. Nor is the Church, as presently constituted, ready to change the rule with regard to bishops.

Moreover, we have constantly to remind ourselves that we are not an isolated sect among the Churches of Christendom. We belong to the family of Eastern Orthodox Churches, notwithstanding our minor internal differences, which set us apart from them culturally and in certain other respects. It is therefore imperative that we should always keep looking around and observe the course of evolution in our sister Churches and in others once removed, as it were, in as much as our history has been related to theirs often very closely. And even though we do not have formal machinery to co-ordinate our efforts with them, yet we should watch and learn from their experience and we should be careful not to depart so far away from prevailing norms as to be estranged from them or to cause their estrangement from us. For the secular world, as we all know, is getting condensed. Nationally and geographically separated societies are coming ever closer together through the incredible rapidity and pervasiveness of the varied means of communication. The Christian world is proceeding on the same road as a matter of course. Those who try to take the opposite direction will do so to their own loss and peril.

“On the other hand, those who would leave the Monastery, while keeping their order of the secular priesthood (*erit-suthiwn*), should leave their cowl (*vel’ar*) behind and depart where duty calls them. From then on they should not be counted among the members of our Brotherhood. However, we deem it to be good and proper that they should, on the first occasion, conjugate in lawful marriage so that they may not turn their minds hither and thither and thus hesitate to give direction to their steps and as a result sin may have

dominion over them.” (To the Most Glorious Patriarch of All Armenians, St. James Printing Press, Jerusalem, 1924. pp. 4-6, translated from the Armenian by the writer).

### *An Attempted Compromise*

In 1924 a number of encyclicals by the Catholikos Georg V had reached Jerusalem after a delay of over a year in the mail. On this occasion, in response to one of these encyclicals (No. 102), El'ishe Durean, one of the few learned, wise and saintly figures among the Armenian clergy of our times, found himself in the same quandary in which we find ourselves now, in the last third of the century. On the 26th of March, 1924, he wrote a letter to Georg V in Etchmiadzin. Following is the governing paragraph of this letter, which though printed, was not at the time generally published.

“...We are contemplating something like this, O Venerable Patriarch (Hayrapet): to invite in due time to the vocation of the ministry in the Church our students, who have been gathered from among various communities and who are candidates for ordination, to the diaconate and then three years later to the priesthood. To do this, however, without requiring of them to take the vow of celibacy, yet making a condition for them that they should, after their ordination to the priesthood, remain in the Monastery for a period of five or seven years, attending to their work in whatever service or office they may be assigned to. When the time has come and the duty of their service to this Holy See has been fulfilled, then they should be invited again, with the permission of the Patriarch and at the discretion of the Administrative Council of our brotherhood, to make their decision in a definitive manner whether they have the willingness to take upon themselves the yoke of the monastic life of celibacy or not. That is to say, whether they would choose to remain permanently in the Monastery or whether they would rather go out of the Monastery and work as priests in the married state (yeritsut'ean kargi) in some other place.

“Those who, with sober counsel and clear conscience undertake to walk in the narrow way—because then, as it appears to us, the reason for regarding them immature in age and in experience would be removed—would take their vow, would receive the cowl (vel'ar) with an appropriate blessing in accordance with the canons of the Book of Ordinations, and would later receive the special Degree of the Doctoral

Staff. . . And then, those who in this way would have proven themselves worthy among the members of our Brotherhood, would be given the right to be elevated to important elective positions and responsible offices and would be entitled, according to their merit, to the full doctorate, and in due time to the order of the episcopate by the laying on of hands by the Patriarch (Hayrapet) of All Armenians, and should be zealous guardians throughout their lives of all the rules and regulations of our Brotherhood and our rights in the Holy Places, and thus these devotees should henceforth see how diligently they would please the Lord, according to the Apostle.

### *Dispensation and Legislation*

Durean's proposal did not apparently elicit a favorable response from Catholikos Georg. We don't know the reason for this. But it would be reasonable to presume that the Catholikos wanted to postpone the consideration of the matter to a more propitious time when the discussion of the problem within a wider circle would be possible. We must note very carefully, however, that what the Patriarch was in effect proposing to the Catholikos was a new legislation to modify radically the old rule of celibacy. Durean was advocating that a monastic priest should be allowed to terminate his vow of celibacy, then to marry and continue in his office as a married priest. This new rule, if accepted, would be applied first in Jerusalem and then, as a matter of course, generally throughout the Church. This is not to be compared with a dispensation in accordance with the principle of economy granted to a clergyman by a bishop using his prerogative and releasing the clergyman from a vow which after careful review is deemed to have lost its meaning and purpose in the given circumstances. We have to realize that a dispensation does not establish nor does it abolish nor yet even suspend a rule. It simply takes one particular case out of the purview or coverage of a rule, staying its operation in one single case for good reason. We need not go into the discussion of the circumstances that make dispensations necessary, or into the possible long range effects of the eventual frequency of dispensations, should this happen to be the case. Nor do we have to expatiate on the nature, the function and the purposes of the canons of the Church. Suffice it to say again that a bishop is in his right to make a



special dispensation in allowing, upon careful review, a priest to continue his ministry after contracting marriage. We have already discussed at some length the legal basis of such an affirmation. Nor is the rule of celibacy the only rule from which a dispensation may be made by a bishop. But we need not dwell on the problem further.

### *Obsolescence of the Rule*

All human laws and rules are valid and operative only so long as they are generally accepted in practice by the public which is expected to be guided by them in its conduct. But when such acceptance erodes by the passage of time while ideas, attitudes and circumstances which form the basis of the rule change, then the rule becomes in effect obsolete without having been formally repealed by competent authorities. This is specially true of rules which can only be enforced by moral persuasion, as all church rules have been since the separation of Church and State in most civilized countries in modern times. The real intent of the rule of celibacy for the secular clergy is already in the process of becoming obsolete. To try enforcing it under pain of exclusion of the offenders from the communion of the Church, or in the case of deacons and priests in special circumstances from the exercise of their office, would be highly impractical, and we might add, unwise. We cannot overlook the fact, however regrettable, that many church people, laymen as well as clergy, are by and large indifferent, not to say tolerant, toward the conduct of some of the celibate clergy who unashamedly disregard the rule in their private lives. . .

In view of all this we are inclined to think that the people who were actually responsible for accepting the marriage of a priest and agreeing that he should continue to remain in office in their church and thereby demonstrating the obsolescence of the rule of celibacy of the secular clergy were the parishioners of the Church of the Holy Cross in New Jersey, who not only stood behind the action of their bishop and their priest, but also turned up in force to attend the marriage ceremony. This was a significant manifestation, which may very well have mirrored the real situation and the prevailing atmosphere in the Church today with respect to the attitude of the public towards the problem of the celibacy of the clergy.